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# ‘Joburg has its own momentum’: towards a vernacular theorisation of urban change

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This article demonstrates the importance of theoretical frameworks which make allowance for complexity in understanding urban processes and outcomes. Drawing on research conducted in inner-city Johannesburg, it shows that the regeneration process there, although being led by the private sector, is characterised by a multiplicity of goals and practices and is giving rise to a vernacular, hybrid process which does not fit comfortably into pre-given categories or analytical frameworks. It will be demonstrated that, in a context in which several of the features which have precipitated gentrification in other parts of the world are present, a more **varied** process is unfolding. Potential gentrification is mitigated by **inventive practices which reflect the developmental ambitions of the post-apartheid period and the spatial dynamics of the inner-city**. However, developmental ambitions cannot escape the constraints of neoliberalism and the benefits of the renewal process are limited by the prevailing socio-economic and political conditions. In drawing attention back to the particularities of individual cases, this case study serves as a reminder that multiple impulses and factors prevail in all societies. **Inner-city Johannesburg is thus approached as a context which invites us to rethink concepts, assumptions and ways of reading cities and the dynamics which are shaping them. Robinson (2003a, p. 277) turned to Johannesburg to illustrate how we can move away from ‘a divided approach to cities, where some are interpreted as structurally irrelevant and others as globally powerful, to one where all (ordinary) cities are understood as complex, diverse and contested environments for living’.** The inner-city demonstrates how city spaces are multiple things at once – places shaped by neoliberal policies and the exigencies of the market, growing displacement and inequality, but also spaces of hope, experimentation, innovation and efforts to create more inclusive and integrated urban forms. The aim of the article is not to dismiss the relevance of terms like gentrification or neoliberalism, but to draw attention to the ways in which these currents and structuring influences, whilst inherently powerful and destructive, also exist amongst a plethora of other agendas, actions and outcomes. It therefore uses inner-city Johannesburg not as a destination for theory or interesting empirical example, but as a case which speaks to and

helps us understand the conditions of cities and the ways in which they are shaped and lived everywhere.

### *Transition in the inner-city*

Johannesburg's inner-city is a diverse and contradictory space. It contains a mix of uses and spaces, including warehouses, motor mechanics and small-scale factories, offices belonging to international finance corporations, as well as informal businesses, improvised churches, and decayed buildings which have been cut off from water and electricity connections, but remain occupied by people unable to access other types of accommodation in the city. Over the last three decades there have been momentous changes in the area. These are best encapsulated by Hillbrow and Berea, two high-rise neighbourhoods located in the heart of the inner-city. Occupying roughly 2km<sup>2</sup>, they have some of the highest residential densities in the city and are home to over 200 000 people. Whilst they were originally established to house the white population employed in and around the CBD, today they are home to an overwhelmingly black African population, comprising South Africans as well as migrants, particularly from Zimbabwe and Nigeria.

This article is based on research conducted in the CBD, Jeppestown, Hillbrow and Berea over nine months. Research involved interviews with housing providers in these areas, as well as government officials, security personnel, housing supervisors and tenants. Interviews were supplemented by ethnographic observation carried out in the course of living in the inner-city, which included attending community events, planning meetings, security shifts and street patrols. Below is a map depicting the central regions of the inner-city and marking the locations of residential buildings in which research was carried out:



The inner-city has always been at the forefront of the making of the South African social and political order (Burawoy and van Holdt, 2012). It developed in conjunction with the late-19<sup>th</sup> and early-20<sup>th</sup> century gold mining boom (Beavon 2004). Under the colonial and apartheid regimes it flourished but was maintained as a racially segregated area, with the presence of black people<sup>1</sup> highly regulated and restricted (Chipkin 1993; Mbembe 2008). However, throughout the 1980s and 1990s the area underwent momentous capital flight and racial transition. **Fearful of growing political instability** and constrained by banks who had started to redline the area, many businesses and white landlords and residents began to relocate. As apartheid's segregationist laws began to weaken and the shortage of housing in the townships became more acute large numbers of black people moved in to replace them. The first black people to move were generally well-educated, middle-class Indian and Coloured people

<sup>1</sup> The term 'black' is used to refer to all the different racial groups in South Africa who were discriminated against during the colonial and apartheid periods. In cases in which more specific details are required, the terms Indian, Coloured and black African are used to differentiate the groups. This is done with the knowledge that whilst these terms are impositions and socio-political constructions, they were historically relevant to the ways in which South Africa was structured and remain salient to people's identities and engagements with the world today.

(Crankshaw and White 1995). Their presence created tensions but was tolerated in suburbs such as Hillbrow. However, as conditions in the townships worsened, black Africans moved into the area in greater numbers, accelerating the exodus of white people.

Black Africans arriving in the inner-city were generally of lower education and income levels than Indian and Coloured tenants, and had to resort to sub-letting and overcrowding apartments in order to afford rents. The increased numbers of people living in high-rise buildings put great strain on infrastructure and led to many buildings falling into disrepair (Crankshaw and White 1995). Destruction was exacerbated by opportunistic landlords who capitalised on the vulnerable position of black residents, charging excessive rentals and neglecting their responsibilities, secure in the knowledge that desperate tenants with precarious legal statuses were unable to challenge them. This practice became widespread and created a culture of slumlordism in the inner-city (Morris 1999a). Eventually tenants began to organise against these exploitative practices; buildings were vandalised by angry tenants and rent boycotts became commonplace (Morris 1999a). Landlords lost control of their buildings and owners of individual apartments abandoned their units, leaving many buildings with no management structures and ever-mounting utility bills. Criminal syndicates capitalised on this situation and filled the vacuum in control and rental collection. The collapse of infrastructure and breakdown in property relations and law and order also opened up space for other criminals (Leggett 2003). By the mid-1990s property prices in the area had plummeted, the majority of shops and businesses had fled and many buildings had become slums, drug dens and brothels. Local government, overburdened with city-wide challenges and staggering inequalities inherited from the apartheid era, had given up all control over and efforts to maintain the area (Winkler 2006).

### *Regenerating the inner-city: limitations, criticisms, experiments and opportunities*

In the early 2000s local government renewed its interest in the area and initiated a process of regeneration. This was also the time in which neoliberal policies and practices became entrenched in South Africa (see Marais 2001; Bond 2003; Gumede 2007) and consequently came to shape the ways in which regeneration was pursued. Whilst there is no national policy

on urban regeneration (HDA 2013), the various strategy and policy documents which contribute to local government's approach make it clear that the process has been conceived in a largely neoliberal, property-based framework (City of Johannesburg 2007; Winkler 2006). The process centres on attracting private investors and businesses who will purchase run-down buildings and renovate them so that they can be used for new residential or commercial purposes. Buildings are purchased either on the open market or through government-supported schemes, such as the Better Buildings Programme (BBP) (discussed below). Overall local government plays a limited role, focussing mainly on providing tax incentives and enhanced policing. These measures are designed to boost investors' confidence and attract businesses so that the ultimate aim – boosting property values in the area – can be realised.

Consequently, the process has come in for its fair share of criticism. Beall et al. (2000) and Bremner (2000; 2004) argue that the regeneration process places too much emphasis on achieving World Class or Global City status, instead of poverty alleviation, creating employment and assisting informal traders. Murray (2008, p. 46) complains that the rush to attract private developers parcelled the city into 'privatised fiefdoms' which negate any sense of public space. Winkler (2009) argues that the interests of private investors are privileged above those of local communities and the poor, and that the regeneration process is another iteration of the global spread of gentrification. The charges that the process is a form of gentrification are enhanced by the fact that evictions and displacement have been widespread. The majority of buildings which have been renovated were occupied prior to being purchased and there have been several high-profile and violent evictions. Stealthy forms of displacement are also occurring, as rentals increase and people, particularly migrants lacking formal documentation and employment, are pushed out of the area.

The prominence of businesses' influence in restructuring the city has been exacerbated by the proliferation of City Improvement Districts (CIDs). These are local variations of the Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) which have become commonplace in cities across the United States and Britain and assist in driving entrepreneurial urbanism and the privatisation of public space (Ward 2006; 2007). In South African cities CIDs are criticised for enhancing private control of urban areas and further fragmenting already unequal and divided urban

landscapes (Bénit-Gbaffou et al. 2012; Didier et al. 2012). Their use of privatised cleaning, maintenance and security services entrenches differential access to resources and amenities and makes the disparities between areas controlled by private interests and those yet to attract investment even more stark. Security personnel in CIDs also focus attention on policing ‘unwanted’ populations, particularly the homeless and beggars (Berg 2004; Peyroux 2006; Paasche et al. 2013).

At the same time, progressive changes should also be recognised. The process unfolding not only seeks to increase property values, but is also achieving developmental goals and challenging conventional processes of urban change. One example of this is the distinctive way in which the rent-gap in the area has been utilised. The rent-gap has been highlighted as a decisive factor initiating the gentrification process (Smith 1987). Whilst cultural factors and the role of the state are also influential (see Butler & Robson 2003; Ley 2003; Harris 2008; (Harris 2012), a general feature across all incidences of gentrification is a depressed property market which attracts investors who recognise the value which can be unlocked with little capital outlay (Smith 1987). Johannesburg’s inner-city certainly presents a case of a rent-gap. Property prices in the area plummeted throughout the 1990s (TA 12/02/2013). The area’s substantial infrastructure and central location, combined with local government’s neoliberal agenda, make it a potentially prime spot for the types of gentrification experienced elsewhere, including in Cape Town (Paasche et al. 2013), to emerge. However, strategic **political** decisions, **creative practices and responsiveness to the prevailing conditions** have resulted in a different form of regeneration. **This alternative form demonstrates that it is possible to put strategies associated with neoliberalism and practices based on the market to more progressive and developmental uses** (Ferguson 2010).

After the period of decline, developers were able to purchase buildings at extremely low prices. Rather than spurring a flurry of high-end redevelopment, this served as a catalyst for social and affordable housing to be provided. Social housing in South Africa caters to households earning too much to qualify for free **government-provided** housing but too little to access housing via the market. **Free** housing (predominantly in stand-alone units located on peripheral land) is available to those earning below R3500 (£200) per month, whilst social housing caters for those earning between R3500 and R7000 (£400). In South Africa there is



no continuous housing subsidy for individual households. Rather, there are two once-off subsidies available to social housing institutions, the Capital Restructuring Grant and Institutional Subsidy (HDA, 2013). These help cover the initial capital costs and equity contributions required for development projects, after which institutions are expected to sustain themselves through commercial practices. In Johannesburg, local government also supported the expansion of social housing in the inner-city through an innovative programme designed for dealing with slummed buildings. The Bad Buildings Programme was initiated in 1997 and rechristened the Better Buildings Programme in 2003 (BBP). Through the BBP the City Council repossesses buildings whose arrears amount to more than their market value and sells them to pre-approved developers at reduced rates (Zack et al., 2009). Companies acquiring buildings through this programme have to cater to low-income households. The Johannesburg Housing Company (JHC), the predominant social housing institution in the city, was able to acquire several inner-city buildings in this way. The private sector did not benefit from the BBP as much as social housing institutions, but were also able to purchase buildings at very low prices. They also do not qualify for the subsidies available to social housing institutions, but in the inner-city they are able to cater to low-income earners due to the low costs of acquiring properties, which effectively served as a form of subsidy (MMC 08/04/2013). A tax-incentive scheme also awards rebates and reduced rates to private-sector housing providers catering to people in lower-income brackets.

In addition to using the rent-gap and decayed buildings in unconventional ways, finance for the acquisition and renovation of inner-city properties is being used to facilitate the provision of low-income housing and actively prevent high-end regeneration or gentrification. Commercial banks continue to red-line the inner-city. This has created spaces for agencies specialising in financing low-income and social housing to operate. There are three agencies operating in inner-city Johannesburg: the Trust for Urban Housing Finance (TUHF), the National Housing Finance Corporation (NHFC) and the Gauteng Partnership Fund (GPF). The latter two are direct off-shoots of government, although they operate independently, while TUHF gets its money from commercial partners and the NHFC (CM 16/04/2013). Whilst households earning between R3500 and R7000 are supported by social housing, those earning between R7000 and R14000 (£802) are left to access housing through normal market mechanisms. However, they are dismissed by banks as too risky to lend to and frequently have to resort to downward raiding, renting backyard shacks or houses intended for poorer



households (Lemanski, 2014). This group has come to be termed the ‘gap market’ and agencies such as the NHFC, TUHF and GPF only finance private projects that will cater to households in this bracket. This focus means that the loans they provide are favourable and concerned more with the creation of sustainable housing than profitability (KN 12/06/2013). Companies securing loans are given lenient terms and extended repayment periods. NHFC loans to private developers are charged at the prime interest rate plus 2%, whilst social housing institutions are charged only the prime interest rate (TH 09/03/2013). The GPF grants loan recipients a three-to-four year grace period on repayments to ensure that the projects become sustainable (KN 12/06/2013). As there is no rent control in South Africa financial organisations insist that projects they fund cannot charge starting rentals above R4500, and limit annual increases to 8% (TH 09/03/2013). Housing developers still have to ensure that their projects are profitable so that loans can be repaid and their businesses can survive, but these lenient conditions do give them room to manoeuvre and help maintain rentals at rates which people with restricted incomes can afford.

Finance agencies, whilst conscious of and constrained by the need to make loans which will be commercially viable, still place socially oriented development above ruthless property investment. The CEO of TUHF explains, “We often turn down projects where the product is too high-end, this million rand plus kind of stuff. It’s got to be low-to-moderate income” (PJ 07/02/2013). These agencies also place a premium on the location of the projects they finance and are determined to contribute to spatial integration in Johannesburg, which remains a **racially** divided and **spatially** fragmented city (Harrison et al. 2003). Therefore opportunities to live in centrally located and affordable housing are highly sought-after and desperately needed. In interviews tenants enthused about the access to transport, economic opportunities and social amenities living in the inner-city affords them. A tenant living in social housing represents these views when he explains “Hillbrow is the only place, the only solution. If you stay in the location [i.e. township] the money spent on rent and transport is equal to what I pay here” (LS 01/03/2013). Thus the creative use of decayed properties and finance not only brings about much needed physical upgrading, but also assists in integrating lower-income people, who remain predominantly black, into the city. Thus it is apparent that a form of developmental regeneration is being pursued, albeit through the market. As a hybrid form of regeneration with dualistic agendas and outcomes it complicates conventional readings of urban processes, resonating with research carried out and conclusions reached by Miraftab

(2007), Lipeitz (2008), Wang (2011), Parnell and Robinson (2012) and Houghton (2013). Together these cases add complexity to our readings of **various** of urban processes which, although sharing similar features to those identified by scholars concerned with gentrification, revanshism or harmful neoliberal urbanism, still remain distinct.

Terms like gentrification and neoliberal urbanism tend to characterise urban regeneration and property-based redevelopment programmes as zero-sum games which always have inevitable outcomes and clear winners and losers (Lemanski 2014). Consequently, they become processes devoid of agency and developmental or progressive potential. The case of Johannesburg clearly challenges this assumption and draws attention back to the localised, vernacular strategies actors **formulate in response to the complex conditions they encounter** (Bernt 2012; Maloutas 2012; Watson 2014). Finance agencies active in Johannesburg encourage landlords to be sensitive to the needs of tenants who survive on limited incomes and only work with people whom they trust as responsible, good landlords (PJ 07/02/2013; CM 16/04/2013). This fosters a culture in which housing providers are more inclined to engage with their tenants and take their socio-economic circumstances into account. Thus, whilst housing companies conduct thorough background checks on potential tenants and require proof of employment or income, bank statements and one month's rent upfront (onerous demands for many inner-city residents), they also permit one person to take out the lease on an apartment and then sublet to others. It is common for two or three families to rent three-bedroom apartments or for two adults to share one-room apartments. This helps overcome the disparity between the rentals charged and the average incomes of the inner-city population (see SERI 2013) and makes housing accessible to a wider range of people, including those who earn informal incomes and migrants. They also treat each case of rental arrears on an individual basis, considering tenants' payment histories and financial circumstances and granting people grace periods in which to pay. However, punitive measures and ultimately evictions also remain options for dealing with tenants who are consistently late in paying their rent or **unable to pay**.

Thus, whilst working within a commercial paradigm, housing providers do not simply impose exclusionary visions and practices, but rather adopt pragmatic approaches which adapt to the needs and realities of the inner-city and its inhabitants. In interviews several developers

emphasise the importance of providing housing to the low-income market. Referring to the upmarket Maboneng precinct<sup>2</sup>, which arguably does resemble gentrification seen in other parts of the world, one housing developer points out that in the inner-city “there is a market for the young yuppie environment but it’s not a huge market, whereas the need for affordable housing is massive” (RP 08/02/2013). Another developer dismisses Maboneng as “not viable” and states that his company’s focus is on “safe, solid, basic accommodation” which is far better suited to the needs of the majority of people seeking housing in the inner-city (NB 24/04/2013).

Gentrification research, which has now spread around the globe, is criticised for placing too much emphasis on economic factors, thereby removing agency from participants in processes of urban upgrading (Lemanski 2014) and detracting from extra-economic social forces (Ghertner 2014). Experiences from Johannesburg emphasise the additional factors which shape processes of urban change and need to be accounted for in analyses. Developers take pride in improving the inner-city and their tenants’ lives, seeing themselves as positively shaping broader post-apartheid society. One of the developers exclaims that his company is “helping to start rejuvenate the city and provide desperately needed housing” and that this “gives a great feeling about what we are doing; we’re contributing to a country that needs everything it can get” (RP 07/08/2012). This feeling of pride in contributing to the betterment of the area and society was shared by all interviewees, indicating that the regeneration process is valued not only for the commercial success it brings, but also for the developmental results it yields. This makes it possible to speak of the emergence of an alternative way of relating to the inner-city and its population, which can be theorised as a new form of habitus. Habitus refers to the socially-learned evaluations, dispositions, values and actions which members of particular social groups adhere to and through which they mediate their expectations and understandings of society (Bourdieu 2005a; Reed-Danahay 2005).

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<sup>2</sup> In this fashionable section of the inner-city industrial buildings have been converted into artists’ studios, retail outlets, restaurants and residential units. Research was carried out here, but due to its small size and negligible residential population (it currently occupies 150 000m<sup>2</sup> and houses roughly 500 residents) the CBD, Hillbrow and Berea were deemed to be more representative of the dynamics and processes currently defining the inner-city.

### *Emerging forms of habitus*

In South Africa there are competing forms of social order and value systems shaping communal life (van Holt 2012; 2013). Whilst racial forms of distinction and hierarchy persist in some settings, Nutall (2008) points to the emergence of new aesthetic forms which place greater emphasis and worth on blackness. She demonstrates that a post-apartheid cultural habitus and system of distinctions is emerging, particularly in urban South Africa. In addition to being driven by commercial concerns and the neoliberal habitus (Bourdieu 2005b), housing providers in the inner-city are shaped by this new socio-cultural milieu too. They have a close engagement with the area and the populations residing in it and, in contrast to conservative banks and ruthless slumlords, are able to appreciate and embrace the racial and cultural transition which the area has undergone. Reflecting on how the area has changed in recent years, TUHF's CEO notes,

“more people live and work in Joburg than ever before, and it's much more of a 24/7 type of city, and it's much more Afrocentric rather than Eurocentric, and the people and businesses who have left Joburg aren't going to come back and the people who stayed probably aren't going to leave” (PJ 07/02/2013).

There is thus a new disposition towards the inner-city and appreciation for the role it plays in post-apartheid South Africa, which is being nurtured by finance agencies. The majority of housing providers and investors are white. **Yet, in responding to the new context they operate in, they acknowledge that preserving the inner-city as an idealised European space is undesirable** and that a new population with new needs, cultural practices and ways of being urban now inhabits it. Housing providers' dispositions are, therefore, reflective of the **contemporary** democratic dispensation and socio-political context they are embedded in and demonstrate the ways in which this temporal context produces a particular habitus. Even in conditions which resemble closely the globally hegemonic neoliberal framework, alternative social priorities, policy frameworks and cultural and contextual settings are able to temper the harmful side of market-led regeneration and produce alternative identities and outcomes.

This habitus is also a reflexive response to the material and spatial conditions of the inner-city. Whilst Bourdieu largely neglects the spatial aspects of habitus (Painter 2000; Savage 2011), Holt (2008) argues that habitus is inherently spatial and embodied, and emerges out of

people's physical encounters with and in space. This becomes increasingly apparent when elements from Lefebvrian theory are added to the analytic equation. Lefebvre emphasises that space is a product of the social relations constituted by capitalism, but also argues that space reproduces these relations through the ways in which it gives form to lived reality and practices (Schmid 2008; Stanek 2011). In this conception space is not simply where things happen, but is a constitutive element of society and the actions people engage in. It influences why and how things happen and is therefore an integral element in the formation of people's habitus (Centner 2008).

In Johannesburg the practices adopted by housing providers respond to and reflect the particular spatial conditions which they encounter. Despite the process of severe decay, the inner-city is not a blank canvas onto which visions can simply be imposed, no matter how dominant and influential the actors. Rather, it is a social space that inculcates ideals, worldviews and practices. For some segments of South African society, particularly white members, the decay represents all the dangers which they associated with the end of apartheid and many have sought refuge in far-removed gated communities (see Morris 1999b; Czeglédy 2003; Popke & Ballard 2004; Duca 2013). In contrast, housing providers' close proximity to and engagement with the inner-city leads them to adopt more pragmatic responses to its current forms of urbanity. As one (white) housing developer complains, "Everyone told me I was nuts [to invest in the inner-city]; most white people are scared of Hillbrow...it's just prejudice" (PL 13/09/2012). The head of the largest for-profit housing company in the area echoes this approach. Whilst his company's financial position and sizable property portfolio imbues him with considerable influence over the area, he also acknowledges that succeeding in the inner-city requires adapting one's practices to suit the environment and diverse populations who reside in it. As he reflects, Johannesburg "will always be an African city" (RP 07/07/2012).

The social problems – including high levels of unemployment, homelessness, violence and drug abuse – which continue to be prevalent in the area also influence housing providers' habitus and engagement with the space. There is a strong emphasis on the materiality of the work they do and the role spatial conditions play in shaping their priorities. Thus their habitus is a product of a wider socio-political context but is also firmly formed in space and in

response to the experiences, needs and possibilities which the inner-city imposes on them. This is emphasised by the Operations Manager at JHC, who demonstrates how experiences in and engagements with the area cultivate particular developmental dispositions and practices. Emotionally he explains

“urban regeneration for me, it has to be in your fibre and your way of looking at things and if you don’t have that positive outlook – you *have* to have that in this inner-city. If you’re not interested in urban regeneration you’re going to be very frustrated in this place” (CdW 06/02/2013 emphasis in the original).

It is thus clear that the motivations driving the regeneration process and the results it is engendering have specific temporal and spatial dimensions (Lees, 2012), which need to be taken into account and used to inform analyses. The term ‘vernacular production of space’ has been used to describe processes of producing ‘homegrown neighbourhoods’ and forms of housing (Ghertner 2014, p.1558) – in Johannesburg it can be used to describe homegrown responses to urban and social decay and housing shortages.

Thus, whilst the inner-city does in many ways provide another example of the negative effects powerful commercial interests are having in shaping urban spaces, it also serves as a significant symbol of South Africa’s racial transition and the emergence of diverse forms of African urbanity (Mbembe & Nuttall 2008). *In an attempt to grant African societies the same capacities and complexity afforded to Western experiences of modernity, and therefore recognise them as places from which theorisations can be derived from, rather than simply applied to,* Comaroff and Comaroff (2012, p.9) assert that, ‘African modernity is a *vernacular...wrought in an ongoing geopolitically situated engagement with the unfolding history of the present [italics in the original]*’. Thus, as much as urban processes and experiences within Africa are shaped by external and macro-structural forces, they are also formed by the creative practices and agency of local actors responding to the contemporary worlds they face (Simone 2001; Pieterse 2010). Housing providers in the inner-city demonstrate this adaptive, creative and contingent approach. One employee of JHC captures this and the way people are embracing a new definition and experience of the area when he declares,

“There was major panic and hysteria but when the dust settles it’s not all doom and gloom. The more we hold on to the past, the more we don’t succeed. It’s not the old

CBD of banks, it's something different. The people who were able to see that are the ones who benefited and made a difference" (MM 16/08/2012).

In this case, rather than being read in terms of its deficits and failures to meet the standards of European urbanity, or achievements in this quest, the inner-city and the process of regeneration is appreciated for its own idiosyncrasies, experiences and possibilities. It is hence vernacularised and reminds us of the importance of keeping 'heterogeneous urban experiences' in focus, so that more nuanced and rounded understandings of the urban condition can be attained (Baptista 2013, p. 595).

### *Facilitating African urbanism*

The vernacular form which regeneration is taking is further evinced by the new forms of African urbanism it is facilitating. Since the end of apartheid Johannesburg has been inserted into the African continent through the constant flows of people and goods from the wider continent finding their way into the inner-city and out again. Rather than being an insulated bastion of segregation, it is now intertwined with the rest of the continent and the upheavals and uncertainties prevailing in other countries. Hence it is shaped by multiple elsewhere, all coming together and producing a lively, dynamic urban centre (Mbembe and Nuttall, 2008). Whilst xenophobia is still common, some tenants residing in the inner-city have gained more worldly, cosmopolitan forms of habitus. As one tenant living in social housing excitedly relates, "in Hillbrow there's lots of different kinds of people from the other countries, so we experience how they live, different cultures when we meet in Hillbrow!" (GM 25/04/2013). Another Zimbabwean tenant describes the community living in the inner-city as follows:

"It's multicultural. The balance is even, you get all cultures here, you get all races...So it shows how much diversity we have, which I appreciate and that [xenophobia] has never been a problem here" (RP 30/05/2013).

The new-found cohesion in the inner-city can largely be attributed to the success of the regeneration process, which has placed strong emphasis on community-building and enhancing the safety of the area. The improved urban environment means that competition for resources and services is less intense than in the informal settlements, which experience the most violent forms of xenophobia. A JHC employee emphasises the positive relationship between urban regeneration and cohesion in the area when he reflects:



“The definition for us as a whole is seeing lasting impact, changing neighbourhoods and areas. We have done great things where what used to happen and where we are now are worlds apart. We are creating homes, working with communities. We’re a property management company, sure, but overall it’s really about community development” (MM 16/08/2012).

Many tenants spoke about how the area has become safer and more welcoming. This change has been brought about by private security companies such as Bad Boyz and initiatives like the eKhaya Project. Both are tied strongly to and financed by housing companies, who together have established two Residential Improvement Districts (RIDs) in Hillbrow and Berea. The RIDs work on the same premise as CIDs but are geared towards residential needs and the liveability of the areas, rather than commercial functions (Peyroux 2012). Under their auspices two parks and a theatre devoted to life skills and education have been established and holiday programmes for children are organised.

Because regeneration has made the area safer and more hospitable, low-income and working class black families are now able to gain stability, security and conveniently located housing. The positive impact is underscored by the ways tenants’ households have changed. Whereas in the 1990s and 2000s the majority of people living in social housing were single males, at present the majority of tenants are couples or families with children (JHC, n.d.). 74% (42) of the tenants interviewed live with their families, whilst only 18% (10) live alone or with people they are not related to (data was unavailable for five interviewees). Regeneration is thus helping to reverse the dispersal and break-up of African households caused by apartheid, and is allowing black families to occupy a formerly exclusionary area. Viewing these changes within the broader South African context thus allows for greater appreciation of their significance. One tenant underscores the transformative benefits of the process and the relation between residing in the inner-city and freedom. He enthuses, “it was like a *wow* thing, now suddenly we had this freedom, now we could live in these buildings which previously black people were denied so it was unbelievable! (TN 30/05/2013). **Initially** this new freedom coincided with severe urban and social decay. Currently, however, not only are people able to live in buildings in the inner-city, they are able to do so in relative peace and security.

However, despite the highly significant improvements made to the inner-city, the process still proceeds within a market paradigm and has not overcome the limitations this imposes. Whilst social and developmental concerns feature heavily, emphasis also remains on the profitability and commercial viability of housing projects. For example, communal housing – rented bedrooms with shared bathroom and kitchen facilities – is the cheapest formal accommodation available in the inner-city. Rents in these buildings, which are provided by social housing and private companies, range between approximately R800 (£37) and R1700 (£80). However, TUHF does not fund communal developments as it fears that if the projects fail the re-sale value of these buildings will be too low. In this case, commercial concerns trump developmental imperatives. All actors involved in regeneration have to walk this tightrope and balance the competing demands and paradigms they are operating in. **Thus whilst the process should be supported and appreciated for the way in which it is creating viable, well-located neighbourhoods which are accessible to the black working class, urgent attention needs to be focussed on protecting vulnerable residents from displacement and ensuring that the most poor residents of the inner-city too can benefit from urban upgrading.** Housing providers too are caught in the contradictory logic which defines the process. The CEO of JHC reflects on the competing demands housing providers are forced to try and meet when she explains

“The thing is, a lot of people have this idea that if you’re a non-profit you can’t do financial engineering, you shouldn’t look at funding like businessmen – you should!...we cannot achieve our development objectives if we do not make enough money to do so” (ES 07/02/2013),

A private developer too clearly reflects the dichotomy at the heart of urban regeneration and housing providers’ motivations when he states

“The only people who can fix [the housing crisis in South Africa] are the private sector, but we’ve got to be given the tools and the incentives to get in there because if we’re not going to make money out of it, we’re not going to do it, simple as that” (RP 08/02/2013).

Understanding the regeneration process thus demands nuanced perspectives and sensitivities. The fact that it is market-driven does not negate the positive effects it has had;

simultaneously, the benefits derived through the process do not negate the fact that **some communities have been displaced and** private interests and the marketisation of housing **have been further entrenched**. There is an unresolved tension between the imperatives of the market and the need to provide low-income housing which is limiting the extent to which developmental changes can occur. For these reasons, the process which is unfolding is dualistic, and represents **neither a solely neoliberal approach to regeneration, nor a progressive, developmental process**. It is, rather, a contradictory hybrid of both.

As such, it is a process which is not easily captured in the terminologies and labels currently in vogue in urban studies. **Post-colonial scholars criticise an academic tendency which persists in framing and analysing** Southern societies in terms of the experiences, language and telos of the West (Chakrabarty, 2009; Robinson 2006 Comaroff and Comaroff 2012). This form of trajectorism leaves little room for understanding Southern experiences in their own right or **developing theoretical innovations from these contexts which can be applied in other societies**. The case presented here challenges linear forms of analysis and shows how regeneration in Johannesburg is a creative, contingent, contradictory and contextually-embedded response to a dynamic, contested and uncertain context. One private developer captures how the ways in which the city is changing do not resonate easily with experiences from other urban settings. Reflecting on the future of the inner-city he points out that the demand for housing is coming from low-income households and that they are the ones who are currently defining the area, and will continue to do so, and that his role is to adapt to their needs and provide housing for them: “wherever you go poor people need somewhere to stay, they always gravitate to the cheapest areas. So we’re relaxed on credit control, it doesn’t matter if you’ve been blacklisted. People wouldn’t rent [in the inner-city] if they had clean credit records” (PL 13/09/2012). He refutes the idea that the area is prone to gentrification and insists instead that “Joburg has its own momentum” and will continue to develop and change in ways which are unpredictable, surprising and driven by local logics and experiences.

### *Conclusion*

It is therefore apparent that whilst labels such as gentrification and neoliberal urbanism do indeed capture significant aspects of the transition currently underway, they also fail to tell the complete story and potentially obscure as much as they reveal. The case presented here

calls attention to the ambiguity and diversity of processes of urban change and enforces the need for research to be attuned to the unpredictability of vernacular experiences and practices. When the concept of gentrification travels it has the tendency to subsume diverse processes under one common term, **which itself emerged out of a particular, vernacular context**, (Maloutas 2012). In doing so it not only obscures important experiences and opportunities for learning (McFarlane 2010), but also potentially loses its critical edge (Ghertner 2014). In contrast, theorising from a vernacular perspective requires employing a variety of vocabularies and concepts and allowing for varied, unexpected findings to emerge. It also means being attuned to the uncertainties, multiplicities and constant forms of becoming which define **all** urban spaces.

Post-colonial societies are good, but certainly not the only, settings in which this mode of thought can be experimented with because by nature they are contested and dynamic (Robinson 2003b; Roy 2009; Comaroff & Comaroff 2012; van Holt 2013; Watson 2014). This is not to **overlook** the multiplicity of Western/Northern societies, which certainly are **diverse** and home to varied **urban** experiences (Hall 2013; Peck 2015), but to recognise that forces and practices of experimentation, uncertainty and resistance are frequently closer to the surface in societies whose social and political regimes are more unsettled and contested. It is also important to bear in mind that distinctions between Southern and Western societies are false binaries and overlook the ways in which, rather than being separate worlds, these societies are products of a shared, mutually-constitutive history and remain linked in the present (Robinson 2006). Thus it is hoped that the position developed and advocated in this paper can shed light on and be of use to scholars working in a variety of contexts and settings.

The case of Johannesburg emphasises the need for research to engage with and reflect local concerns, agendas, life-worlds or forms of habitus and to avoid reliance on pre-given categories or analyses. If research is only concerned with discovering the comparable, generalisable features of urban societies, and thus mobilising concepts or terms which supposedly have global reach, the particularities and possibilities inherent in individual cases are lost. Along with this, the ability to think differently and to understand alternatives and variance in all urban societies is also lost. Within a vernacular framework the salience of

terms such as neoliberalism, gentrification and revanchist renewal is not dismissed. These are real driving forces shaping the changes rolling out across many urban settings, including inner-city Johannesburg. However, these terms need to be seen as existing alongside other imperatives, policies and forms of agency which all shape urban societies and contribute to their diversity. To argue that something is vernacular is to emphasise that it is a unique coming together of a variety of agendas, interests, practices, ideologies and outcomes. It is not to emphasise that this particular case is local and therefore different or excluded from the global or generalizable, but that the vernacular is itself a universal condition.

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